

Week of VD Awareness in Erie County, New York, 1972

MICHAEL J. ENNIS

TO FOCUS attention on a seemingly neglected venereal disease epidemic in Erie County, N.Y., the staff of the Office of Health Education and Information of the Erie County Department of Health designated 7 days in April 1972 as a "Week of VD Awareness." This special health education program was created to supplement the regular services provided by the county's ongoing VD program, whose activities of course continued after the Week of VD Awareness.

Mr. Ennis is a public health educator, Office of Public Health Education and Information, Erie County (N.Y.) Health Department, and served as coordinator of a "Week of VD Awareness." Tearsheet requests to Michael J. Ennis, Erie County Health Department, 95 Franklin St., Buffalo, N.Y. 14202.

Erie County includes the cities of Buffalo, Lackawanna, and Tonawanda; in 1970 its population, including these cities, was 1,113,491, according to the U.S. Census. Venereal disease in this county increased during 1971. There were 2,945 cases of gonorrhea reported—the highest ever recorded in the county in 1 year; 2,845 cases had been reported in 1970. Seventy-four early syphilis cases (primary, secondary, and those of less than 1 year's duration) were reported in 1971, an increase of 46 percent over the 50 reported in 1970.

Planning

The objectives of the Week of VD Awareness were to inform the general public and specific groups about the venereal disease problem; to disseminate information about the causes, effects, signs, and treatment of syphilis

and gonorrhea; and to urge people to seek testing and treatment from private physicians or from the free and confidential clinic in the county.

To achieve these objectives, three public health educators, Gary Costello, Mrs. Rosalind Moxley, and I, along with a public health writer, Richard Klug, made plans early in February 1972. Health education activities for the Week of VD Awareness were determined, and a schedule of deadlines was written for individual activities to be accomplished leading up to that particular week.

We health educators decided to conduct a dozen small group meetings with various community organizations and schools. We also determined that a meeting, open to the general public and to be held in a local high school, would be a target for publicity from local newspapers, radio, and

television. We planned press releases and special materials, including posters and exhibits, and took final steps to enlist the cooperation of the media in advertising the Week of VD Awareness throughout the county.

Exhibits and Posters

Four tabletop exhibits showing the causes and symptoms of VD were constructed and placed strategically in the four shopping malls in Buffalo and the surrounding suburbs. Pamphlets and handouts accompanied each exhibit. Posters were also prepared to help get the message across.

One poster showed a stop sign with VD printed below the word "Stop." A second proclaimed "VD Is Not a Dirty Word." A third stated that "VD Travels in the Best Circles" (VD was written inside the male and female signs). A fourth poster showed a peculiar bug with the question, "Do You Have the VD Bug?" All the posters indicated the location and hours of operation of the venereal disease clinic of the Erie County Department of Health.

Also, a bumper sticker was developed by the Buffalo Jaycees, which told the reader about the health department's VD clinic. This sticker showed four rabbits and asked the question, "Have you caught the love bug?" The Jaycees used contributions from the Erie County Pharmaceutical Association to pay for printing this sticker. The Jaycees distributed the stickers to car owners and also attached them to the walls of restrooms in stores, taverns, and gas stations throughout Erie County.

Public Meeting

A public meeting, called "A Forum on Venereal Disease," was

held the evening of April 24, 1972. It was the focal point of much publicity designed to provide information about venereal disease and to urge the general public to attend the meeting and to learn as much as possible about VD and where to seek testing and treatment.

At this meeting, representatives of community groups and experts participated in a panel discussion on venereal disease. The representatives from community groups had been chosen from organizations such as the YMCA, YWCA, Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, Junior Achievement, Jaycees, Erie County Community College, and the Urban League. Costello and I had held prior meetings with these representatives to help them devise effective questions about venereal disease to ask the professional panel.

The professional panel was made up of the consultant to the VD clinic, a physician of the Erie County Department of Health; a public health adviser of the Center for Disease Control, Public Health Service; the chairman of the Social and Preventive Medicine Department, State University of New York at Buffalo; a representative of the New York State Public Health Association; and a physician representing the Erie County Pharmaceutical Association.

The meeting provided the setting for Erie County executive Edward V. Regan to issue a proclamation declaring 7 days as a Week of VD Awareness. Local newspapers sent reporters, and a local television station covered the meeting for its news program.

Approximately 150 people attended the meeting, including the representatives of the community organizations participating in the program. A 20-minute

introduction by Costello and me included a history of venereal disease that was highlighted by slides and portions of filmstrips. In the main part of the meeting, representatives of community organizations discussed VD questions with the professional panel. During the final part of the program, the audience was invited to ask questions of the professional panel via a portable microphone. The audience responded with many questions, such as:

Why do most people avoid the problem of VD? Why are schools reluctant to provide adequate preventive information? Once treated, and without reinfection, can symptoms of syphilis and gonorrhea return? Does the discovery of VD cause emotional problems?

Group Meetings

Either a volunteer student from the speaker's bureau at the State University of New York at Buffalo, I, or both of us, conducted meetings with the staffs of community organizations and public, private, and parochial schools throughout the inner city and the suburbs. The community organizations included the Neighborhood Youth Corps, poverty programs such as BRAG and AWARE, and the Urban League Guild. The meetings included VD programs at seven schools and five community organizations (table 1).

At each meeting, a student volunteer or I described the problem posed by the VD epidemic, showed a film entitled, "VD: A New Focus," spoke about the myths connected with venereal diseases, and answered questions from the audience.

Handouts, pamphlets, and lists of locations for VD testing and treatment were distributed. Requests from organizations and schools for VD programs in-



Gary Costello (extreme left), public health educator, Erie County Department of Health, introduces professional panel and representatives from community organizations at VD Forum, a public meeting held during Week of VD Awareness. Ennis, the coordinator, is on extreme right

creased as more people heard about the Week of VD Awareness.

Newspapers

The mass media were used extensively during the Week of VD Awareness. Six special press releases were prepared at the health department on: the epidemic (current statistics were supplied on the county's venereal disease problem), the large public meeting, the use of university students as lecturers, the need for volunteer lecturers from the public, and the VD exhibits at the shopping malls. These press releases were distributed throughout the county immediately before and during the Week of VD Awareness. Two special stories by columnists of the daily newspapers highlighted the VD activities and the health education program being conducted at the State university.

Television

Costello and I obtained free time on four local television stations by going personally to the stations' program directors to discuss the epidemic with them. The

directors were willing to cooperate when prepared material was handed to them and when concrete, original ideas were presented in an intelligent package.

The film "A Half Million

Teenagers" was shown by two television stations. One station showed it on a special Sunday night ½-hour program during prime time and followed up with a discussion about venereal

Table 1. Number of persons reached in meetings with local schools and community organizations

Site of programs	Number of persons and sex	Grades or ages
<i>Schools</i>		
St. Mary's High School (suburban parochial school).....	575, both sexes...	9th-12th
Grover Cleveland High School (Buffalo public school).....	150, both sexes...	110th-12th
Bishop Turner High School (Buffalo parochial school).....	900, male.....	9th-12th
Orchard Park High School (suburban public school).....	500, both sexes...	9th-12th
Emerson Vocational High School (Buffalo public school).....	600, male.....	9th-12th
Park School (suburban private school).....	200, both sexes...	9th-12th
Continental Beauty School (private occupational school).....	80, female.....	17-23 years
Total.....	3,005.....	
<i>Community organizations</i>		
Neighborhood Youth Corps.....	50, both sexes...	15-19
Niagara Frontier Rehabilitation Center (cerebral palsy patients and staff).....	100, both sexes...	All ages
Poverty programs: BRAG and AWARE.....	60, female.....	Do
Urban League Guild.....	20, female.....	11-15
Meyer Memorial Hospital (psychiatric outpatients and staff).....	30, both sexes...	All ages
Total.....	260.....	

¹ Health students.

diseases and the content of the film between a physician and us three public health educators.

A third station videotaped four 60-second public service announcements directed at young men, which it duplicated for the other three stations in the area. Each health educator helped write these spot announcements. Two players from the Buffalo Bills football team and the Buffalo Sabres hockey team agreed to record messages.

In one of the spot announcements, Wayne Patrick of the Buffalo Bills said:

Hello. I'm Wayne Patrick of the Buffalo Bills. I'm sure all of you realize that football is a rugged game and that a lot of people get hurt. But did you know that people can get hurt a lot worse by venereal disease? If you think you've been exposed, why not visit your family physician, or for free and confidential help, visit the Venereal Disease Clinic operated by the Erie County Department of Health. It is located on the second floor of the Edward A. Rath County Building, 95 Franklin Street, in downtown Buffalo.

A schedule of clinic hours appeared on camera as Patrick ended this spot announcement.

Four more spot announcements, presented by a fourth TV station, were designed to reach the reservoir of women with gonorrhea—the 80 percent or so who do not know they have the disease. These announcements were recorded by a young white married woman, a white college student, a black high school student, and a white high school student, all of whom were selected for their appeal to their respective peers.

One of the announcements was 30 seconds long; the other three lasted 40 seconds. The idea was that TV stations would be able to use shorter spots more frequently than longer ones.



Wayne Patrick (left), member of the Buffalo Bills football team, and Alan Hamilton (right), a former member of the Buffalo Sabres hockey team who is now with the Edmonton Oilers, discuss the venereal disease problem with Ennis (center), in the waiting room of TV Station WBEN, Buffalo, before taping public service spot announcements about venereal disease

Here is one of the 40-second spot announcements recorded by a female volunteer college student:

There is an epidemic of venereal disease here in Erie County as well as across the United States. I am Pat Fron, a student at the State University of New York at Buffalo. Most women do not know that VD is the major cause of sterility. Eight of ten women who have the disease do not know that they have it, because there are hardly any signs. To find out for sure if you are infected, see your doctor or come to the free and confidential service of the Erie County Department of Health VD Clinic, Room 262, Rath Building, 95 Franklin St., Buffalo, N.Y.

Information about the clinic appeared on a placard as the speaker finished the announcement. Copies of each of these spot announcements were videotaped and supplied free for me to distribute to the three other local stations.

All of these video public service announcements have been used frequently by four TV stations. The spot announcements aimed at women were used often during the afternoon when soap operas are aired.

One TV station dedicated an

hour-long morning program to a discussion of venereal disease. In this program, the host of the program interviewed William E. Mosher, MD, Commissioner of Health, Erie County Department of Health, and me. The public was invited to telephone in questions, which we answered on the air.

A 5-minute interview with the commissioner and a few film clips about VD were included by another station in a special news program at a supper hour.

Still another station made its own 30-second spot announcement showing a panoramic view of Buffalo and closeups of various public buildings while the narrator read portions of a press release:

A Week of VD Awareness aimed at focusing public attention on the crisis of venereal disease in Erie County will be held April 23 thru 29th. During this week of special activities and educational programs, the health department will seek to impress on citizens—parents, teenagers, health workers, teachers and others—the need for concerted action to end the growing threat that venereal disease poses to our community . . .

A cable television station presented 1-hour discussions about venereal disease once a week for 3 weeks, in which Costello and I participated, along with the host.

Radio

Three 1-hour programs were recorded for radio presentation and were broadcast during the Week of VD Awareness. Two dealt with activities sponsored by the local Junior Achievement organization. The first was a round-table discussion about venereal disease among four teenagers, Costello, and me. In the second program, Costello and I quizzed the young people about their views of sex education in the schools, including education about venereal disease. The third radio show presented a lengthy discussion about the activities of the Week of VD Awareness by the program's announcer and Costello and me.

One radio station, whose audience is composed mainly of high school and college students, recorded statements by the consultant of the venereal disease clinic about the increase in venereal disease and methods for preventing it. The announcer also recorded an interview with a teenage VD patient, who talked candidly about how she had been exposed and why she came to the clinic. The patient remained anonymous. The recorded interview, plus information supplied by the office of health education, was divided into 3-minute segments, which were used at three different prime times each day of the week.

Activity at University

Most of the students on the campus of the State University of New York at Buffalo learned of

the VD epidemic and the free services of the clinic through efforts of a social work student. This student was taking her field training in the office of health education and information and was assigned to me for supervision.

This student urged other students who had registered as volunteers for a birth control clinic (which opened months later on the campus) to volunteer in the VD program as members of a speaker's bureau. I oriented the volunteers to the VD problem, and they served as public speakers at some of the programs at high schools and at meetings with community groups.

The student volunteers also prepared a special 2-day program on venereal disease, which was held before the college spring recess in the conference theater of the Student Union building. It included a film presentation and a question and answer period. The volunteers also prepared handouts that they distributed during the 2-day program.

After the spring recess, the volunteers conducted small group meetings with other students in each dormitory on the campus. Before each of these meetings, the volunteers distributed a questionnaire to each student to determine how much the student knew or did not know about venereal disease. The correct answers appeared on the questionnaires. The subjects of the questions were used by the volunteers as a guideline for the meetings.

A feature article in the Spectrum, the University's weekly newspaper, exposed the VD problem and called attention to the activities of the student volunteers.

The volunteers also arranged for the VD program to become

an official part of the Community Action Corps at the university, and thus were able to obtain a budget for materials and traveling expenses for the next semester. This affiliation was significant since the Community Action Corps is probably the most successful service-oriented organization on the Buffalo campus and one that is highly respected.

The volunteers also urged the county health department staff, whenever funds became available, to establish a VD clinic on the campus. This clinic is now in operation on campus two afternoons a week. It is open free of charge to faculty and students of the university.

Results

As a result of the Week of VD Awareness, the student volunteer speaker's bureau and I have subsequently conducted 72 individual lectures as requested by schools and community groups. There have also been two requests from departments of education, one city and one suburban, requesting me to conduct venereal disease orientation programs for their health teachers so that they could include VD information in their sex education curriculums.

Special handout materials for teachers have been prepared—a history of venereal disease, a suggested plan for teaching high school students about it, a list of available films, and a bibliography of sources of VD information that will be readily understood by high school students.

Since only three persons responded to the press release telling of the need for members of the public to volunteer as VD lecturers and these three were unable to attend the training sessions that I had planned for them,

the idea of using such lecturers was dropped.

The local TV stations continued to broadcast the various public service spot announcements throughout the rest of 1972 as often as they could program them.

In the fall of 1972, a local educational television station, informed of the VD epidemic by the earlier Week of VD Awareness, requested that Costello and I participate in a ½-hour TV show which was aired during prime time. This was a discussion of VD by us health educators and the program host.

Another local ½-hour TV show in the fall had Pat Fron and me answering questions live in response to a televised telephone number. This program followed an hour-long national show about venereal disease. Before the question and answer period on the local level, a prefilmed trip through the Erie County Health Department's VD clinic showed the viewer what it was like to attend the clinic.

Finally, there has been an increase in the attendance of patients at the county health department's venereal disease clinics (table 2). In 1971, the total attendance was 7,591; in 1972, it was 10,745, which represents a 41.5 percent increase over 1971. In May 1972, just after the Week of VD Awareness, there was a 75.3 percent increase in attendance compared with that in May 1971.

The only explanation that I can find to explain this increase in the number of patients attending the clinics is the health education activities that took place before, during, and after the Week of VD Awareness.

The figure of 10,745 patients attending the clinics in 1972 in-

Table 2. Attendance of patients at the venereal disease clinics of the Erie County Department of Health

Month	1971	1972	Percent increase
January.....	498	735	47.5
February.....	509	724	42.2
March.....	736	902	22.5
April.....	568	839	47.7
May.....	528	926	75.3
June.....	668	881	31.8
July.....	664	929	39.9
August.....	648	1,064	64.1
September.....	700	1,000	42.8
October.....	706	1,001	41.7
November.....	716	920	28.4
December.....	650	824	26.7
Total.....	7,591	10,745	41.5

cludes 276 patients attending the clinic established in September of that year on the campus of the State University of New York at Buffalo. Attendance at this campus clinic from September through December 1972 was as follows:

Month	Patients
September	59
October	93
November	81
December	43
Total	276

Since the Campaign

During November and December 1972, the Roman Catholic Diocese of Buffalo Youth Department (the Catholic Youth Organization) and I worked to establish a venereal disease hotline for Erie County called "Project Awareness." Sixty high school students, selected by school authorities as being responsible young people, sensitive to the needs of others, were recruited to man the hotline's two telephones.

These 60 were given comprehensive training by me about venereal disease. The training included proper use of the tele-

phone and possible responses to a variety of different phone calls. Each volunteer participated in a variety of role playing so that he could learn to verbalize and respond to all types of questions which could arise in phone calls.

The hotline went into operation January 15, 1973. In its first 7 days of operation, it received about 135 phone calls. The hotline is paid for by the diocesan youth department from funds obtained from private citizens and from the Holy Name Society of the diocese. In future months, a variety of advertising activities are planned to promote it. Lectures in the schools by panels made up of the high school students who man the hotline are also planned for the future.

Some local service organizations, including the Kiwanis Club, the Optimist Club International, and the Jaycees plan to study and to conduct lectures in schools in cooperation with other organizations and parent groups. The staff of the Office of Public Health Education and Information is of course available to consult and to assist in any health education activities that will help combat the venereal disease epidemic.